Newsletter for Birdwatchers

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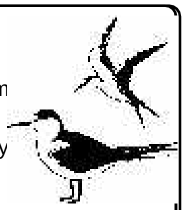

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CONTENTS

- **A Note from the Publisher**
  - ☐ To study or not to study birds at nest?
- **Articles**
  - ☐ Winter breeding of Grey Heron *(Ardea cinerea)* in Chambal River Valley, by Rakesh Vyas and R.S. Tomar
  - ☐ Large congregation of Common Coot (*Fulica atra)* along Indo-Bangladesh border, Malda District, West Bengal, by Arunayan Sharma
  - ☐ Alexandrine Parakeet (*Psittacula eupatria* Linn.) in the Great Indian Desert, Rajasthan, India, by C. Sivaperuman, Sanjeev Kumar and N.S. Rathore
  - ☐ Isabelline Jungle Crow (*Corvus macrorhynchos* Wagler) in ZSI collection, Pune, by Anil Mahabal and Satish Pande
  - ☐ Incubation period of Yellow-throated Sparrow (*Petronia xanthocollis),* by Vishwas D. Katdare, Sachin B. Palkar and Vishwas V. Joshi.
  - ☐ Occurrence of Water Pipit, (*Anthus spinoletta* Linn.) in Asan Conservation Reserve (Dehra Dun: Uttranchal), by M.Vijay and Arun Kumar
  - ☐ Incubation period of Rufous-tailed Finch Lark (*Ammomanes phoenicurus)* and White-bellied Drongo *(Dicrurus caerulescens),* by Vishwas D. Katdare, Vishwas V. Joshi, Sachin B. Palkar and Rohan J.Lovalekar.
  - ☐ Sighting of Sociable Lapwing (*Vanellus gregarious*) in Vidarbha, by Raju Kasambe and Shailendra Chaudhary.
- **Correspondence**
  - ☐ Gull-billed Tern (*Gelochelidon nilotica*) recorded first time from Vidarbha, East Maharashtra, by Atul Dhamakar
  - ☐ First record of Bailon's Crake from Vidharbha, East Maharashtra, by Atul Dhamakar.
  - ☐ Pied Avocet (*Recurvirostra avosetta*) – a new record for Dibru-Saikhowa N.P., by Ranjan Kumar Das and Sonjoy Das
  - ☐ Indian Pitta (*Pitta brachyura*) sighted at the IIM-Ahmedabad campus, by Prof. Jagdeep S. Chhokar,
  - ☐ Notes on the nesting of Black-necked Stork (*Ephippiorhynchus asiaticus)* near the Marine National Park, Jodiya Range, Jamnagar, by Kamal Bhatt
  - ☐ Sighting of Indian Scavenger Vulture (*Neophron percnopterus Ginginianus*) in Ahmednagar city, Maharashtra, by Sudhakar Kurhade
  - ☐ Black Drongos (*Dicrurus macrocercus*) hunting under artificial light at Krishnanagar, Nadia Dt, West Bengal, by Arunayan Sharma
  - ☐ Birdwatching at Thattakad, by K.J. Hartshorn

A Note from the Publisher

Dear fellow Birdwatchers,

To study or not to study birds at nest?

In this issue, we are publishing Kamal Bhatt's note on the nesting of Black-necked Storks in the vicinity of the Marine National Park, near Jamnagar. We are also publishing three articles relating to nesting studies, viz., Winter breeding of Grey Herons by Vyas and Tomar, Incubation period of the Yellow-throated Sparrow, the Rufous-tailed Finch lark, and the White-bellied Drongo by Katdare, Palkar, Joshi and Lovalekar. It is for the readers to debate at length, whether or not researchers are taking adequate care and safety of the nesting birds. Time and again, birders are being blamed for carelessness during the studies at nest, leading to nesting failures. In the long run this could well undermine the very notion that birders are conscientiously interested in the wellbeing of nesting birds. It is therefore very vital that none should ignore or be indifferent to the elementary safeguards, while carrying out nesting studies.

It is a boon to us that modern electronic surveillance gadgets and digital devices are closer at hand than ever before, so that we can execute our studies without having to frequently 'invade' the nests. While such safety measures are commendable, it is only to be expected that there would be divergent views on how to handle the issue of the safety of the birds at nest.

Some senior birders, instead of focusing their energies on serious bird conservation problems, incessantly frown upon nesting studies as unscientific and serving no useful purpose. Studies relating to breeding ecology of birds are constantly nagging them and they scorn such studies as needless exercises that not only jeopardize the nests but also ruin the nesting cycle.

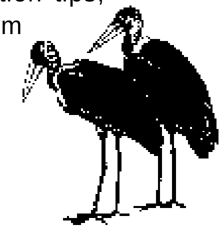
The topic needs to be addressed transparently and it is only upto the birders to responsibly utilize the digital deluge and practice a degree of self-imposed ethics, environmental code of conduct and adhere to the laws of the land, before capitalizing on the nidification opportunities. Concurrently, adequate evidence ought to be digitally documented, as a proof of having taken ecologically friendly actions and elementary precautions near the nest. It would also ring true if attempted systematically, bearing always in mind, the safety of the nesting birds and their offspring. Such steps will not only add credibility to researchers undertaking nesting studies, but also help toning down the rhetorical demands for the cashiering of all nidification studies.

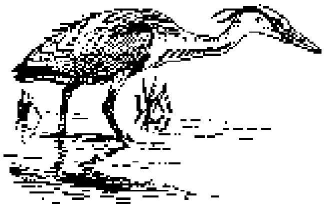
Hence, the time has come for us to pragmatically put the weight behind the popular approach - 'nothing ventured' – 'nothing gained' or in simpler words 'nothing studied' - 'nothing conserved'. There is always something a researcher can 'gain' and bird conservation could indubitably 'benefit', through nidification studies.

Many resident birds are being rendered redundant in their established habitats and latest information relating to nest predation, preferences of nesting seasons, threats to nesting niches and habitats, and choice of food are woefully inadequate. They are essential for initiating conservation measures. But every birder must avoid falling into the temptation of relegating the nest safety aspect in his/her passion for obtaining vital nesting data or a photograph of the bird at nest. One should prefer the path of abandoning the studies rather than forcing the birds to abandon their nests. Ecological stewardship lies in pursuing a responsible path and espousing compassion, whilst attempting research involving nidification and breeding ecology of birds.

Documentation of latest information relating to nidification and breeding ecology is the corner stone for the success of any bird conservation programme. Current nest data has to be interpreted according to the nature and the needs of the relevant species. It is also advisable to carefully gauge the damage wrought to the web of life at large and critically appraise the situation in consonance with the field data, before drawing up conservation strategies. Some may consider this line of reasoning as weak. Even so, we should admit that it is not a simple boardroom exercise or an internet based pastime to offer bird conservation tips, solely based on information gleaned from dated literature.

Thanking you,
Yours in bird conservation,
S. Sridhar
Publisher, NLBW





Winter breeding of Grey Heron (*Ardea cinerea*) in Chambal River Valley

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The Grey heron *Ardea cinerea* is a widely distributed bird species and most frequently encountered wetland bird of Asia, Europe and Africa. At the same time, we cannot remain oblivious of the prevailing environmental conditions, which are causing the loss of habitat of a number of bird and animal species. In this context, understanding the breeding biology and ecology of Grey heron assumes importance. There are not many studies available on this unassuming and unobtrusive bird of our wetlands. Therefore, this study was undertaken to learn its breeding biology, such as clutch size, nesting time, breeding success and threats.

Ali and Ripley (1983) state that Grey herons breed mainly from March to June in Kashmir, July to October in northern India and November to March in south India and Sri Lanka. Sharma (1996) has found them collecting nesting material in April at Keoladeo National Park, Bharatpur. Rahmani (1997) surveyed western Rajasthan and reported only 16 sightings in 12 districts and found no breeding record of Grey heron in desert districts. The breeding biology of Grey heron has been extensively studied in Europe and Africa. Crick et al (2004) have reported its population status in United Kingdom during a 74- year period (1928-2002) and also its productivity rate from 1966 to 2002. Maclean (1985) and his draft update of 2004 provide population, demography and breeding information on African subspecies of Grey heron. In Africa, the nesting has been seen throughout the year and peaks in August. Egg laying has not been recorded in March, April, May and December. In Thai – Malay Peninsula, Grey herons breed throughout the year.

Study Area : Chambal River passes through the great boundary fault between the Vindhyan and Aravali mountain range at Kota in Rajasthan. The cliffs rise more than 100 M over the waterline at certain places. The valley floor supports a wide variety of vegetation including Bamboo *Dendrocalamus strictus*, Arjun *Terminalia arjuna*, Date palm *Phoenix sylvestris,* Wild plantain *Musa superba*; whereas stunted Karaya *Sterculia urens*, Gular *Ficus glomerata*, Bargad *F. benghalensis* and Peepal *F. religiosa* and Dhok *Anogeisus pendula* trees grow in the crevices on the middle and upper tier of the rock face. The river valley between Jawahar Sagar Dam and Kota Barrage (25° 10' N, 75° 52' E) forms a part of the National Chambal Gharial Sanctuary. The breeding colony of Grey heron is situated 6 km from Koa barrage on the upstream side. In the crevices here the

Gular and Dhok trees have taken root. In the course of our study of avian diversity of the sanctuary, we came across this breeding colony of Grey herons. The average day and night temperatures at the initiation of the study in the month of January were 26° C and 10° C respectively, which gradually rose to 45° C and 36° C in the month of May.

Observations : In January 2004, we saw from the boat a gathering of 16 Grey herons on the cliff, adorned with plumes on their mantle and breast, bright orange bill and pink legs. We had not seen such a gathering of this otherwise solitary bird and this was also not their breeding time as per the books, but the changed plumage and courtship display made it obvious that the birds were ready to breed. Since it was not their normal time of breeding and no previous record was available of their breeding in winter months in northern India, the study was initiated. Subsequently the males were seen carrying twigs in their bill for nest building. On 17th January their nesting site was located in a desolate part of the river valley, about 13 Km from Kota city. The nest building had commenced on 3 Gular trees that were about 8-12 M. below the ground level and 20 M. above the waterline. The egg laying had started on 27th January and continued till 1st April. Nine nests out of 11 had eggs or chicks by the end of February. There were only two late nesters, out of which one failed to breed due to egg predation and eventually abandoned the nest.

The breeding plumage and bright colour on bare body parts is retained for a short time. The females are not as brightly coloured as males. The courtship display as observed during the study is mainly of two types. After a low throaty call the bird extends its bill skyward and brings neck over the back, rocking body forward and crouching low. An abbreviated version of this display is also seen when relieving its partner of nest duties. In another display the male holds its bill extended forward, erects its crest and slowly bows and crouches giving a sharp bill clap. Sometimes short circular flights are made with neck outstretched in front or slightly bent. While approaching the nest, the bird fluffs out crest and body feathers, arches neck slightly and flies awkwardly while giving out a greeting call. The handing over of nesting material to the female is also done with great fervor and grace.

The nest is a solidly built platform of twigs and leafy branches. The male brings the nesting material and the actual construction is done by the female. It has the privilege to choose suitable material and reject the unsuitable ones. The nest is large (40-45 cm.wide) and is able to withstand strong winds rising in the valley. Three to four, usually four (mean 3.8), greenish blue eggs are laid within a span of 7-9 days. The incubation starts with the first egg. Therefore the chicks are born asynchronously and accounts for the size difference in the brood. The incubation time is 26-28 days and on an average the nesting period lasts 65 days. In our study we found that the parents are very wary of any intruder and leave the nest at the slightest disturbance uttering a loud ‘kwaa…’ which signals the chicks to lie low in the nest feigning death. It takes some 7-10 minutes for them to gather confidence once again to rise, quarrel amongst themselves and make noise. Siblings fight with the new arrival for 3-4 days, but the ferocity varied from one individual to the other. We found that many times the youngest chick was the fiercest and fought back tenaciously. We did not see any fatality due to such sibling rivalries.

Result : In this study of one nesting season of the Grey herons we were able to observe 11 breeding pairs at close quarters. Eleven nests were built on 5 trees in the Chambal River valley. We found eight clutches of 4 eggs and two clutches of 3 eggs, thereby giving a mean of 3.8 per nest (Table-1). The clutch of two eggs of tree- 5 has not been considered for this calculation because the nest was disturbed and abandoned mid way through. In the 11 nests 40 eggs were laid, out of which 29 chicks hatched giving a success rate of 2.6 to the colony. 23 fledglings left the nest successfully to lead an independent life, which gives a breeding success of 2.1. Hatching success and breeding success in Britain is 3.8 and 2.9 respectively (Crick et al., 2003). The survival rate of the chicks is 79.3% in the colony studied by us (23 out of 29 chicks survived). There were only 6 post hatching deaths (3 Juveniles, 2 Chicks and 1 downy Chick). 6 eggs were lost (2 predated, 4 fell off the nest) and 5 eggs failed to hatch. We did not see double brood or replacement clutches in this colony although such phenomenon has been reported elsewhere. Most

Table – 1. Nesting Record of Grey heron in Chambal River Valley

Tree	Nest	Eggs	Chick/ Juv.	Alate Subadult	Remarks
Tree1	Nest 1	4	3	3	1 egg failed to hatch
	Nest 2	4	2	2	2 eggs failed to hatch
	Nest 3	3	3	2	1 Juvenile died
Tree 2	Nest 1	3	3	1	2 chicks died
	Nest 2	4	3	2	1 egg lost 1 chick died
	Nest 3	4	1	1	3 eggs lost
Tree 3	Nest1	4	4	3	1 Juvenile died
	Nest 2	4	2	2	2 eggs failed to hatch
Tree 4	Nest 1	4	4	3	1 Juvenile died
	Nest 2	4	4	4	
Tree 5	Nest 1	2	-	-	Eggs predated, Nest was disturbed and abandoned

importantly, it is the first report of winter breeding of Grey herons in north India.

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Large congregation of Common Coot (*Fulica atra*) along Indo-Bangladesh Border, Malda District, West Bengal

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During the third and fourth week of January 2006, I carried out a survey on " Flood Plain Wetlands of Malda" along the Indo-Bangladesh international border in Malda district, West Bengal. The main purpose of the survey was to understand and estimate those wetlands values and their documentation from the point of view of management tool for flood control and to understand their avifaunal wealth first time along the highly restricted Indo-Bangladesh international border in Malda district, West Bengal. I was surveying along the Indo-Bangladesh border on the eastern side of Malda district. On 22nd January 2006 I was near the 24A IBBR Pillar Post in Alipore, adjacent to the Nawabgang district of Bangladesh in its northwestern side. The area is under140BN Indian Border Security Force field station situated c. 8km from Malda Town (English Bazar) at Alipore Border Outpost in Malda district. With the permission of the Alipore Border Security Camp Commandant, I began surveying and watching the birds in the wetlands on the Indian side of the border. At around 1010hrs I found some large flocks of black birds foraging on a large wetland just about 400m from the border on the Indian side. Immediately I focused my telescope towards those birds. The large flocks of black birds was easily identified as Common Coot *Fulica atra* by me. After a close observation through 20-60x telescope, I scanned all the parts of this ca 4sq km., partly fresh and marshy wetlands which is known as Noondighi wetland. I counted five flocks of Common Coots and in all 3800 Common Coots were recorded from this wetland. I counted those flocks of Common Coots again and again from different approaches to the wetland and each time the number was around 3800 birds. For the purpose of wetland survey and to watch the waterfowl, I visited the area for the next three consecutive days. On all the three days I found the flocks of Common Coots still foraging at the same wetland and their population remained the same.

Common Coots are widespread resident and winter visitors in India, breeding locally up to 2500m in the Himalayas. They have been recorded up to the Sunderbans in West Bengal. They arrive in large numbers to some big wetlands in Malda during winter. Large flocks of Common Coots are also common in the wetlands of Murshidabad district in West Bengal. However it is considered as a rare resident in Bangladesh. Sighting of large number of Common Coots along the Indo-Bangladesh border close to Nawabganj District of Bangladesh indicates that large numbers of coots also can be found in the wetlands of Bangladesh. Some of the wetlands are so big that a portion of the wetland is controlled by India and the remaining portion by Bangladesh. According to the locals a large number of migratory birds arrive during winter to these wetlands which are politically divided. However it should be noted that during the Asian Wetlands Waterfowl Census, only 1072 Common Coots for the year 2004 and 3601 Common Coots for the year 2003 were reported from West Bengal. Consequently my observation of 3800 coots in a wetland abutting Bangladesh is a record for the Malda district, if not for the state of West Bengal. The presence of such large number of coots in a single site, not only highlights the importance of our wetlands but also underscores the need to protect the avifaunal wealth of wetlands of Malda district, West Bengal.

Alexandrine Parakeet (*Psittacula eupatria* Linn) in the Great Indian Desert, Rajasthan, India

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The Great Indian or Thar Desert is biogeographically the easternmost edge of the Sahara-Arabian Desert Zone. The Thar Desert occupies 9 percent of the India's geographical area extending about 2,78,300 sq km. The hot desert in the northwestern region is unique and is the only habitat of its type in the Indian Subcontinent. In spite of very harsh climatic conditions the region exhibits vivid and spectacular biodiversity.

The Indira Gandhi Nahar Project (IGNP) is one of the largest and expensive irrigation systems in dryland in the world. The IGNP is considered as a grand endeavor to bring water from Himalayas to vast stretches of arid Western Rajasthan. Greater part of the main IGNP canal suffers from wind and shifting sand dunes, which block the flow of water in the canal. In order to prevent the wind and the shifting sand dunes, afforestation was initiated on both sides of the IGNP canal up to 100 m width. These vegetations provide shelter to many species of birds and they are using it as a corridor for their movement. In the canal areas, the underground water table is rising due to the seepage from the canal system. As a result of it at many places inter-dunal reservoirs have formed where the vegetation cover has changed from Xerophytic and Psamophytic species to Hydrophytic and Mesophytic. Although, the arid environment has been supporting many species of waterfowls, waders and passerines, the arrival of canal water has increased the diversity of avifauna in the Thar Desert.

Most part of the Western Rajasthan is changing due to introduction of water through IGNP. Over a period of 10 years or more, the vegetation pattern and cover have changed tremendously giving rise to a habitat change from destricolous to moist niches especially in and around human habitat zones. Jodhpur and its surrounding areas have developed a good vegetation cover dominated mostly by fruit trees and neem plantations. These habitats provide good habitat for the migrating bird species.

Most of the passerines migrate to the local areas, especially to the human habitations, and as a result, Alexandrine Parakeet *Psittacula eupatria* (Linnaeus 1766) was recorded from Jodhpur in the month of June 2003. A single bird was recorded in the residential campus and was continuously observed for a long period. Three more individuals appeared in the same locality during the month of August 2003. The birds were observed along with a flock of Rose-ringed Parakeets *Psittacula krameri* in the moderately populated human habitation adjoining the rocky habitat. Human habitations are a good habitat to many of the passerine species. Because of the religious sentiments people provide food materials, which attracted the bird species.

Literature review revealed that earlier observers have not reported the Alexadrine Parakeet from the Thar Desert (Agoramoorthy and Mohnot, 1986; Mukherjee, 1995; Rahmani, 1997 and Changani, 2002). Rahmani and Soni (1997) have reported the Alexadrine Parakeet from the North Western part of the Thar Desert and mentioned that this species is common in the plantations and forest. Recently, Shantanu Kumar (2003) reported the Alexadrine Parakeet from a farmhouse at Jaipur. This is the first report of the Alexadrine Parakeet from the human habitations of Jodhpur. *Ficus bengalensis* is a good roosting site for these birds and these species are still showing their presence in the same locality. The number of individuals reported is increasing and there is a possibility of this species becoming resident in due course of time accentuated by the favourable niche development in the region.

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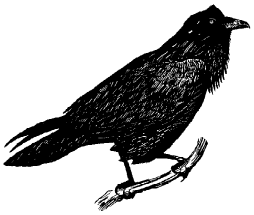
Isabelline Jungle Crow (*Corvus macrorhynchos* Wagler) in ZSI collection, Pune



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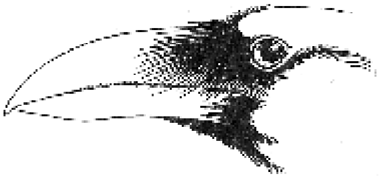
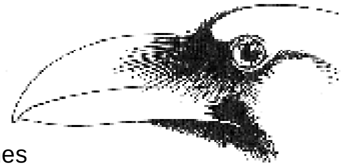
The colours of feathers in birds depend upon the presence and structural arrangement of biochrome pigments, such as melanins, porphyrins and carotenoids. Genetic, hormonal and environmental factors however influence their visible expression. Melanins are the most common pigments while porphyrins are the rarest (Heimo Mikkola *In* Duncan, 2003). Albinism is the total absence of pigment melanin from feathers, eyes and skin. Further, melanism is the occurrence of abnormally black coloured individuals due to excess presence of melanin pigment in their skin, feathers, beak, feet, etc. Besides these, there are other pigment abnormalities such as reddish (rutilistic) and yellowish (flavinistic) and their combinations. The detection of the absence of a particular pigment due to genetic colour mutation is often not possible, hence leucism or isabelline are terms that are often used to describe the abnormally pale cloured birds. (Heimo Mikkola *In* Duncan, 2003). Some bird species have different colour phases or morphs such as brown, grey and red or rufous, but true mutations are rare.

While studying the rolled bird collection in the laboratory of Zoological Survey of India, W. R. S. Akurdi, Pune we recently came across a brown colour phase (isabelline) of Jungle Crow *Corvus macrorhynchos* Wagler, collected by the first author (AM) at Uralikanchan on Pune - Solapur road, district Pune, Maharashtra on March 7th 1979, bearing registration number B / 922 *(see photograph on back cover page)*. The specimen is a female and the biometry is as follows: Wing chord-270 mm, Tail-172 mm, Bill-58 mm, Tarsus-54 mm with total body length 38.2 cm. Normal plumage of Jungle Crow and isabelline plumage of the Jungle Crow in ZSI collection are compared in Table 1.

Reports of melanism in birds are very rare; however, there are a good number of reports of albinism in various avian species including crows. An albino House Crow *Corvus splendens* is reported from Orissa (Acharjyo and Mishra 1973). There is one more record from Jasdan, Kutch, with comments that there were three in Mysore Zoo (Kachar, 1983). A fairly good number of House Crows with white patches either on the wings or tail feathers (cases of partial albinism) have been observed in population of these crows in Pune during 1974-80 (Mahabal, 1991) and even during 2002-2006, the authors have recorded several such cases of partial albinism in House Crows in Pune. Besides these, cases of albinism there is a report of brown variety (isabelline) of House Crow from Calcutta in issue of *J. Bom. Nat. Hist. Soc.* Vol. VII (2): 519, 1906 as *cited* by Bulu Imam, 1988 and one more record of golden brown-isabelline House Crow from Maharashtra along with a photograph. (Pande, *et al*, 2003)

Like the House Crow there are reports of a total albino Jungle Crow in Bilaspur, Himachal Pradesh (Sar, 1987) and in Mandi, Himachal Pradesh (Mahabal, 1991). There is also an almost white Jungle Crow in the collection of Bombay

Table 1: Table comparing normal plumage and isabelline plumage of Jungle Crow in the collection of ZSI, WRS, Akurdi, Pune.

Body Part	Normal Plumage	Isabelline Plumage
Plumage	Uniformly glossy, Jet-black	Non-uniform, pale brown to dark brown
Nape	Dusky black	Brownish dusky 
Crown, mantle, belly	Black	Dark brown
Lesser coverts	Black	Brown
Median coverts	Black	Pale brown
Greater coverts	Black	Whitish brown
Primary feathers	Black	Very pale brown 
Secondary feathers	Black	Brown
Upper tail coverts, rump	Black	Brown
Tail feathers	Black	Pale brown with dark patches
Beak, feet and claws	Black to blackish grey	Dark brown

Natural History Society, Mumbai (*cited* by Bulu Imam, 1988). Narang (1991) reported white shoulder patches on the wings of number of Jungle Crows 100 km away from Solan, Himachal Pradesh. There is the first record of golden brown (isabelline) Jungle Crow from Hazaribag, Bihar (Bulu Imam, 1988). Our report could be the second record of an isbelline Jungle Crow.

It is evident that the reports of isabelline Jungle Crow are scanty and the present report adds one more such record, more importantly since the preserved rolled skin specimen in the ZSI, W. R. S. Akurdi, Pune is readily accessible for future reference and genetic or other studies to interested students and scientists.

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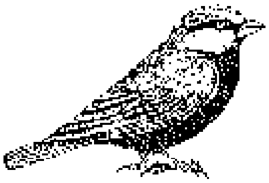

Incubation period of Yellow-throated Sparrow (*Petronia xanthocollis*)

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Yellow-throated Sparrow *Petronia xanthocollis* is a common resident and local breeding bird found all over India. This bird is usually found in flocks. Its breeding period is from February to June. Eggs are 3 or 4 pale greenish with smudges, smears, streaks and blotches varying from grey-brown to dark sooty brown. These birds use natural tree cavities, telephone poles, and abandoned nests of Barbets and Woodpeckers for their nesting (Ali & Ripley, 1983).

Soni R.G. reported this bird's incubation period is around 14 days. (1993). In our study we observed it to be 12 days.

STUDY AREA:

1) Chiplun: - Ramtirth a central place of Chiplun (17°-31/ N.73°-31/ E) city having a lake. Incubation period of Yellow throated sparrow *Petronia xanthocollis* was determined by observations of the nests in a *Bridelia retusa* tree, during 2004 & 2005.

2) Parshuram: -It is a famous place in Ratnagiri district named after Parshuram, the Hindu god. It is situated 12 kms to the Northwest side of Chiplun city. The study area was a privately owned land having a number of *Tectona grandis* trees, a part of it is semi-evergreen. Dry deciduous forest and scrub jungle also occur there.

Average rainfall in these areas is about 3500mm. Average temperature in winter is 23°c. Average temperature in summer is ca 40°c.

METHOD

We checked the nests twice daily i.e. once in the morning and once again in the evening. The nests which were at a height of three meters and above were checked by using a mirror at the end of a stick. (A plain 3-inch diameter mirror was attached to one end of a 9 meter long aluminum pipe). Some observations were made using a 10 x 50 binocular also.

OBSERVATIONS:

Parshuram:

We found the nest of this bird on a dried up tree at a height of 2 meters from the ground. Nest building started on 10th March 2002. Both the birds were busy in lining the nest. But the female's contribution was noticeably greater. Nest was open from upper side. The birds used feathers, pieces of snake's slough etc., for lining in the nest.

On 14th March 2002 at 1025 hrs we noticed the first egg. At 18.00 hrs we observed the second egg. On 15th March we observed two eggs at 1010hrs. The female did most of the incubation. The male was seen spending greater part of the day sitting nearby, chirruping loudly and monotonously.

The first egg hatched on 27th March 2002 at 0830hrs. Another egg had a white coloured ring at one side. The chick had white colour at the edges of the beak. In the evening at 1800 hrs the egg and chick were attacked by red ants. Then after

Table Showing Progress of Nests in Yellow throated sparrow *Petronia xanthocollis.*

Nest No.	Place	Year	Eggs Laying Dates			Hatching Dates			Fledging Dates
			1	2	3	1	2	3	
1	P	2002	14/03	15/03	—	27/03	—	—	D
2	C	2004	—	15/03	16/03	28/03	I	I	—
3	C	2005	14/03	14/03	15/03	27/03	27/03	27/03	16/04
4	C	2005	28/04	29/04	30/04	11/05	11/05	12/05	30/05

Abbreviations:I-Infertile egg, D-Dead chick, P-Parshuram, C-Chiplun.

about 24 days we observed the second brood in the same nest. But we were not sure as to when the eggs were laid.

Chiplun:

The nest was placed about three meters from the ground. Nest building began on 09th March 2004. Both the birds were busy in lining the nest. On 15th March at 1025hrs we observed two eggs in the nest. On 16th March we observed three eggs at 1010hrs.

The first chick had hatched on 28th March at about 1000hrs. But the remaining two eggs remained infertile and did not hatch. After this we could not observe the progress of the chick. After about 30 days a second brood was raised by the Yellow throated Sparrows in the same nest.

In 2005, the nest building commenced on 11th March. Here also the birds used feathers and pieces of snake slough for lining the nest. The nest was completed on 13th March. For the first two days we observed a Common Garden Lizard *Calotes versicolor* inside the nest in the morning.

On 14th March we observed the egg of the sparrows and a Common Garden Lizard inside the nest at 0800hrs. The female was near nest and was seen chirruping loudly and monotonously. Often she stood over the nest and watched inside. Afterwards we didn't observe the Lizard inside the nest. At 1400hrs the egg was inside the nest; but the lizard was not sighted. The second egg was laid on the same day at about 1800hrs. On 15th March, the third egg was laid between 0700hrs and 0920hrs.

On 27th March we observed two chicks and one egg inside the nest. The egg had white coloured ring at one end and a hole was also noticed at 0830hrs. At that time we observed black ants near the nest. By 1745hrs the third egg had also hatched. Both the male and the female were busy feeding the chicks

By 15thApril all the three chicks were fully feathered. On the next day i.e 16th April two chicks had fledged from the nest and the third chick remained inside the nest. The fledged chicks were found on another tree nearby. The third chick also fledged at 1425hrs on the same day (16th April). Some droppings, rice and wheat grains were found inside the empty nest.

After about ten days the second brood was raised in the same nest. On 26th April, the birds were busy relining the nest. The first egg was laid on 28th April at about 0830hrs. On the Next day (29th April) we saw yet another egg at 0830hrs. The third egg was laid on 30th April.

On 10th May we observed a white coloured ring around the eggs at 1800hrs. On the next day (11th May) there were two chicks and one egg with white coloured ring at one end. Both male and female were busy in feeding their newly hatched chicks at 0800hrs. By 12th May at 0730hrs the third chick had also hatched. On 30th May all three chicks fledged from the nest.

Thus incubation period was determined as the period between laying of last egg to hatching of that egg (Skutch A.F.1954), it was found to be 12 days.

CONCLUSION: -

Incubation period of Yellow-throated Sparrow *Petronia xanthocollis* is 12 days. Normal clutch size is three. Fledging period is 20 days.

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Occurrence of Water Pipit, (*Anthus spinoletta* Linn.) in Asan Conservation Reserve (Dehra Dun: Uttranchal)

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The Asan Reservoir (30º24’ N and 77º40’ E) is a man made wetland situated 40 km west of Dehradun (Uttranchal) , approximately 3.2 sq. km in area. It is located at the confluence of the river Asan and Yamuna hydel canal (Dhalipur Power House). In winter it provides an ideal habitat for migratory waterfowl that come here in large numbers. It is an Important Bird Area of India (IBA site code: IN-UT-O1). Two new man-made wetlands were recently created in adjoining low lying areas on the north and south of the Asan Reservoir. The entire area was declared as Asan Conservation Reserve (ACR) in August 2005.

On one of our regular field trips to Asan wetland on 6th of October 2005, we came across a small loose flock of 6 water pipits along the edge of newly created wetland in AC R. The birds were seen walking swiftly, often pumping its tail, feeding in loose groups on invertebrates. On closer observation we noted the following morphological features: upper part fulvous brown and lightly streaked, whitish supercilium, fairly conspicuous wing bars and dark legs. This is the first record of water pipit in ACR. The species is winter visitor to north western India and breeds in the alpine zone of the Caucasus, and mountains of northern Iran, and in Central Asia (Ali and Ripley 1983). The species, which is passage migrant to this area, is a wetland dependent bird (Arun Kumar et al. 2005).

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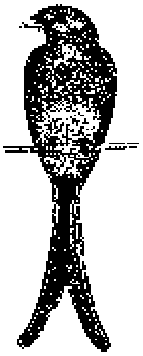

Incubation period of Rufous-tailed Finch Lark (*Ammomanes phoenicurus*) and White-bellied Drongo (*Dicrurus caerulescens*)

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We studied the incubation period for the following two species of birds :-

1) Rufous-tailed finch lark *Ammomanes phoenicurus*

2) White bellied Drongo *Dicrurus caerulescens*

Study Area: Chiplun (17^0-31$^/$ N.73^0-31$^/$ E) is a small city in Ratnagiri district. It is near the foothills of the Western Ghats and is about 50 kms from the Arabian Sea.

1) Parshuram: It is a famous place in Ratnagiri district named after Parshuram, the Hindu god. It is situated 12 kms to the Northwest side of Chiplun city. The study area was a privately owned land having a number of *Tectona grandis* trees. A part of it is semi-evergreen. Dry deciduous forest and scrub jungle also occur there.

2) Valope: It is a small village situated at about 6 kms to the north of Chiplun city. Valope has a mosaic of dry deciduous as well as semi-evergreen canopy and grassland patches.

Average rainfall in these areas is about 3500mm. Average temperature in winter is 23^{0}c. Average temperature in summer goes up to 40^{0}c.

Method : We checked the nests twice daily i.e. once in the morning and once again in the evening. The nests which were at a height of three meters and above were checked by using a mirror at the end of stick. (A plain 3-inch diameter mirror was attached to one end of a 9 meter long aluminum pipe). Some observations were made using a 10 x 50 binocular also.

1) RUFOUS-TAILED FINCH LARK *Ammomanes phoenicurus*

Rufous Tailed Finch Lark *Ammomanes phoenicurus* is a rufous – brown colour bird. It is a resident bird found in West Pakistan, from North Kutch, Delhi, West Bengal, Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, Orissa (Ali & Ripley, 1983)

Open rocky scrub, and grassland are its favorite habitats. The bird's breeding period lasts from February to May. (Ali & Ripley, 1983)

"Murari" is famous Marathi local name of this bird. We studied the incubation period of this bird at Valope.

Nest : S shallow cup of grass lined with fine grass, hairs, and rootlets placed on the ground in a shallow depression under the shelter of a stone or bush in the open land. (Ali & Ripley, 1983) Both the birds built the nest.

Eggs : Eggs are 2 to 4 creamy or greyish white in colour, freckled and spotted with reddish brown, amber brown or inky purple more densely at the broad end forming a cap. Average size of 50 eggs given by Baker is as 21.2 x 15.7mm (Ali & Ripley, 1983).

OBSERVATIONS:

We found a nest of this bird sheltered under a big stone on 17th March 2002. There was only one egg. The second egg was laid on 18th March, while the third was laid on 19th March. All the eggs were laid in the mornings.

On the 13th day i.e. on 31st March the first egg hatched at around 0720 hrs. The attending bird removed the egg shell. The second egg hatched at 1700 hrs on the same day. The third egg hatched on 1st April in the morning. Both the birds participated in feeding the chicks and nest sanitation. The incubation period was determined as the period between laying of last egg to hatching of that egg (Skutch A. F. 1945). In the present case the incubation period was found to be 13 days.

2) WHITE BELLIED DRONGO *Dicrurus caerulescens*

White-bellied Drongo *Dicrurus caerulescens* is a resident bird of the Konkan. This Black bird with its prominent white belly is found in dry deciduous, moist deciduous and in bamboo forests in the Indian Subcontinent (Ali & Ripley, 1983). It is often found catching insects or feeding on *Bombax malabaricum* and *Erythrina indica* flowers.

Eggs: Eggs were usually 2 or 3, sometimes 4. Warm salmon pink in ground colour blotched and spotted with black or reddish brown. Average size of 40 eggs given by Baker is as 23.6 x 17.8mm (Ali & Ripley, 1983).

Nest: Nesting period of White-bellied Drongo lasts from March to June. Birds are very vocal during this period. Both the birds build the nest. The nest is a shallow saucer, made up of lichens, grass, and leaves, and lined with fine grass and cobweb. Nest was fixed like cradle in the horizontal fork of a tree. We came across the nests of White-bellied Drongo regularly in Parshuram, Valope and in Vindhywasini.

OBSERVATIONS:

On 12th March 2002 we observed a pair of White bellied Drongo *Dicrurus caerulescens* busy in building a nest on *Tectona grandis* tree. The nest was at a height of 5 meters above the ground.

On the morning of 15th March 2002 we observed the pair calling feverishly and mating near the nest. The nest had been completed but the eggs were yet to be laid by the evening of 15th March, when we had a look inside the nest.

But the first egg was noticed inside the nest when we observed the nest on 16th March at 1000 hrs. The second and the third eggs were laid on 17th and 18th March respectively. Incubation began soon after the first egg was laid. The eggs were usually laid in the morning and both the birds were seen incubating the eggs by rotation. The first egg hatched on 02nd April whilst the second and the third hatched on the mornings of 3rd and 4th April respectively.

Thus Incubation period is determined as the period between laying of last egg to hatching of that egg (Skutch A.F.1954). In the case of the White-bellied Drongo it was found to be 17 days.

Conclusion:

Incubation period of Rufous-tailed finch lark *Ammomanes phoenicurus* is 13 days and for the White bellied Drongo *Dicrurus caerulescens* it is 17 days.

Acknowledgment:

We thank Mr. Parshuram Sagonkar for helping us in the preparation of this report.

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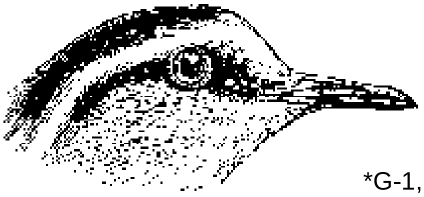

Sighting of Sociable Lapwing (*Vanellus gregarius*) in Vidarbha

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On 11th March 2001, during our visit to Malkhed reservoir situated adjacent to Sawanga Vithoba village we located a Lapwing-like bird on a small island formed in the backwaters. The bird was standing silent on one foot for 45 minutes. It had black crown and black eye stripe. The forehead was white and the supercilium was conspicuously white. The throat was ashy, the lower breast was blackish and the lower part of belly was unmistakably clear chestnut. The chestnut-coloured part of abdomen is surrounded by white, which continues upto vent. The legs were long and black.

One of us, Raju Kasambe, sketched the bird and then looked for it in the Pictorial Guide and Inskipp's guide. It was Sociable Lapwing *Vanellus gregarius* beyond doubt. The bird gave us ample time and flew after half hour.

Malkhed reservoir is situated in the Pohara-Malkhed Reserve Forest and is 18km south-east of Amravati city in Vidarbha (Maharastra).

The Sociable Lapwing *Vanellus gregarius* is a Red Data Book species and is highly endangered. It is a winter visitor to India. According to Ali and Ripley it is sighted irregularly in Maharastra. Stragglers have been reported from Maharastra, Karnataka, Kerala and Bihar (Iyer Mohan). But there is no published record of its sighting from Vidarbha. Apart from the group of 16 birds found in the Bharatpur area of Rajasthan that remained from the time they were first discovered, there have only been one or two more reports of possible sightings from other locations (Bryan Sykes).

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CORRESPONDENCE

GULL BILLED TERN (Gelochelidon nilotica) RECORDED FIRST TIME FROM VIDHARBHA, EAST MAHARASHTRA. *ATUL DHAMAKAR,* Near Patel High School, Shivaji Chowk, Chandrapur 442 402. e mail : atultiger@rediffmail.com

On 4th September 2005, I had been to the Junona Lake, near Junona village of Chandrapur dt, Maharashtra, to watch the nesting activities of Common Coot (*Fulica atra*) and Little Grebe (*Tachybaptus ruficollis*). At 1430hrs I suddenly saw a gull like bird flying over the lake. I quickly focused my binoculars to identify the bird, but even after meticulous effort I couldn't identify the bird. I could only identify it as a bird belonging to the tern family. It looked somewhat like a whiskered tern to me. I took some photographs of the bird using my 500 mm Telephoto lens. Later, when the photographs were processed, I recognized the bird as a Gull-billed Tern *(Gelochelidon nilotica).* The flight of this bird resembled that of tern. The colour was grey-white with black bill and legs. The Gull-billed Tern is a winter visitor to the entire subcontinent, Andaman, Nepal and Sri Lanka. Its breeding season is April to June and it breeds in Pakistan, west Bengal and Bangladesh. It is usually seen moving singly along the coastal mudflats, large jheels and river islands. Its main diet is crabs, aquatic insects and prawns.

This sighting confirms its early migration, i.e. before the onset of winter. The checklist of Vidharbha suggests that this is the first record of Gull-billed Tern from this region. Whiskered Tern *(Chlidonis hybridus)*, River Tern *(Sterna aurantia),* Common Tern *(Sterna hirundo*) and Black-bellied Tern *(Sterna acuticauda)* are already recorded from the Vidharbha and Chandrapur districts.

FIRST RECORD OF BAILLON'S CRAKE FROM VIDHARBHA, EAST MAHARASHTRA

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On 29th March 2005, I was in the Tadoba-Andhari Tiger Reserve (TATR), in Chandrapur district, Maharashtra, for the tiger study. I had just returned to the base camp from a jungle trail and as I was proceeding to the canteen to have my breakfast, I noticed some movement near a wall. I quickly went ahead and saw a small crake like bird trying to hide behind a jute bag. I quickly took out my camera and went near the bag. The bird came out of its hiding and then I thought that it was a Little Crake *(Porzana parva).* I took some photographs of the bird and then it flew away. When I examined the photographs, I was surprised to note that the bird was not a Little Crake but a Baillon's Crake *(Porzana pusilla)*. It was a quail sized bird and was slaty-grey on its lower side. The upper side was brownish-black. A clear white patch was visible on its neck which separates it from the Little Crake. Baillion's Crake breeds in small area of Kashmir and in winter it migrates all over the Indian Subcontinent. Its favourite habitats are jheels and reedy marshes.

This was the first time in 15 years; I could see a Baillon's Crake at TATR. Even more surprising was the fact that this crake was found at the rest house premises, instead of a water body. May be it was about to return to its nesting grounds in Kashmir, because the nesting season for this bird reportedly begins in May. This is the first ever record of the Baillon's Crake from Chandrapur district and Vidharbha Region.

PIED AVOCET (Recurvirostra avosetta) - A NEW RECORD FOR DIBRU.

SAIKHOWA N.P. RANJAN KUMAR DAS AND SONJOY DAS, Tinsukia, Assam.

It was Monday the 29th November 2005; while we were coming back after completing our routine bird survey we saw a white bird wading by the side of the riverbank of Dibru River. We immediately asked our country boatman to move our boat slowly towards the bird. From the distance at first, we thought it to be a Cattle egret. However, when we looked through the binocular and the camera lens, to our utter surprise it turned out to be a Pied Avocet *(Recurvirostra avosetta).* We were sure that it would be a new record for the Bird checklist of Dibru-Saikhowa National Park (DSNP). We could manage to take some photographs when it flew overhead and crossed the river towards the huge wetland of the Motapung and the Maguri beel. Later on we checked with the checklist of DSNP as well as the distribution map in the guidebook of Krys Kazmierczak and Grimmett and Carol Inskipp and it was clear to us that it is a new record for this National Park. Earlier, in the adjacent area we had sighted Short-eared Owl, Eurasian Golden Plover for the first time in DSNP which were new to the bird checklist. Another important bird, the Common Crane is also seen almost in the same location of the riverbank every winter. Therefore, we think that this part of the National Park is very important for the winter and passage migrants.

INDIAN PITTA (Pitta brachyura brachyura) SIGHTED AT THE IIM-AHMEDABAD CAMPUS

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An Indian Pitta (*Pitta brachyura brachyura*) was sighted at the campus of the Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad (IIM-A) on June 20, 2005, at around 6.25 am. The *Handbook of the Birds of India and Pakistan*, Vol.4, (Salim Ali & S. Dillon Ripley, 1973, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, p.252) mentions that the Indian Pitta is a "resident, with a far-ranging seasonal migratory and dispersal movements not properly worked out". The Handbook also mentions that it "breeds over a wide area in northern and central India …; sporadically elsewhere, e.g. Gir forest (Saurashtra)…". It is also supposed to migrate internally within India in large numbers, in keeping with the direction of the southwest monsoon but "details of the movement have not yet been studied".Since I have not come across any records of its sighting in eastern Gujarat, I thought it may be of interest.

NOTES ON THE NESTING OF BLACK-NECKED STORK (Ephippiorhynchus asiaticus) NEAR THE MARINE NATIONAL PARK, JODIYA RANGE, JAMNAGAR,

KAMAL BHATT, Wildlife Photographer M.Sc. (Ecology & Environment), Opp. Dayaram Library, Ranjit Road, Jamnagar-361 001 Mobile 9426458488 E-mail : kamalofddk@rediffmail.com

Black-necked Stork (*Ephippiorhynchus asiaticus*) is one of the most important species listed under endangered species category.

One day I got a message from Radadiya, ACF, MNP, Jamnagar that a pair of Black-necked Storks have built the nest and raising four chicks in the Jodiya Range, MNP, Jamnagar area. I decided to visit the place which is 60 km away from Jamnagar on 22nd of December-2005. First I reached the forest office, Marine National Park, Jodiya Range from where Forester Babi and Forest Guard Umrethia guided me to the site.

The nest was built on a Neem tree situated in the farm of Chhaganbhai, a local farmer. I saw the beautiful male and female of Black-necked Stork in the farm. Two chicks were also present in the farm. However there was only one chick in the nest. I could not see the fourth chick at that time.

I observed and photographed the chicks in the nest. It was trying to take off from the nest and practice flying. After sometime the parent storks took off from the farm and were followed by the two chicks. The remaining chick also took flight to join the family. The owner of the farm Chagganbhai told me that they were invariably coming to the nest every night. Therefore, I also returned to the site in the evening, but the storks did not return that night. I thought the storks might have left that nest as the fledglings were about two months old. But I decided to halt at Jodiya and the RFO, B.K. Shilu made the arrangements for my stay. On 23rd early morning we went again to the site, but the storks had not returned.

One more important thing for me was to confirm the presence of the fourth chick. I hadn't seen it at all. We decided to search for the storks in the wild and spotted them near a river. The three fledglings were found resting on a natural island of the river. We approached the storks carefully for a clear picture and I was very happy to see the fourth chick, a little behind the three chicks. We stayed there for the parents to return with food and 15 minutes later I saw the female stork returning from the creek to join them.

The staffs of the Marine National Park, Jodiya Range, under the able guidance of RFO, B.K.Shilu have done a commendable job of monitoring of the nesting site regularly. They have also taken care to see that the storks are not disturbed during their nesting cycle. On account of these measures and the cooperation of Chhaganbhai, the owner of the farm, the storks could successfully raise four chicks. They all need to be congratulated for their sincere efforts to save an endangered bird.

Some Observations:

1. This is one of the rare incidents wherein four chicks of the black-necked storks were raised successfully from a single nest.
2. I have observed a few nesting sites of the Black-necked Storks; one at Khijadiya Bird Sanctuary, Jamnagar, and another in Kutch District, Jodiya Range of MNP, Jamnagar. I presume that they prefer to nest near estuarine habitats close to both fresh and sea water. Similar observations from other birdwatchers, if any, are needed to support this viewpoint.

SIGHTING OF INDIAN SCAVENGER VULTURE (Neophoron percnopterus ginginianus) IN AHMEDNAGAR CITY, MAHARASHTRA. *SUDHAKAR KURHADE,* Honorary Wildlife Warden, Riddhisiddhi, Vidya Colony, Opposite HUDCO, Pipeline Road, AHMEDNAGAR – 414 003 Maharashtra

Ahmednagar is a district town situated in the central part of Maharashtra. It is the main historical city in the Deccan and lies between 19º 12" North latitude and 74º 2" East longitudes at an elevation about 615 m above sea level. More than 100 bird species are recorded so far from the city (Kurhade, 1997). The city is expanding towards North since last few years and housing and commercial complexes are being constructed in the area.

It was on 25.vi.2005 that one young Indian Scavenger Vulture (*Nepohron percnpterus ginginianus*) was observed in the T.V.Centre area of the city. When the area was scanned for nesting of the bird nothing was found, but on 29.vi.2005 an adult bird was found in the same area (in the premises of the T.V.Centre). Though the area is residential, there is a small nulla nearby with a thick patch of Babul (*Acacia* sp.), as this area is used by the nearby population for dumping garbage and for day today activities too, the vulture must be getting food from the area.

Indian White-backed Vulture (*Gyps bengalensis*) is already recorded from the city and the surrounding area but this is first record of Indian Scavenger Vulture from the city.

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BLACK DRONGOS (Dicrurus macrocercus) HUNTING UNDER ARTIFICIAL LIGHT, AT KRISHNANAGAR, NADIA DT. WEST BENGAL. ARUNAYN SHARMA, Centre for Ecological Engineering, Netaji Subhash Road, Malda-732101, West Bengal

The Black Drongo (*Dicrurus macrocercus*) is an omnivore species feeding on a variety of insects. I observed black Drongos feeding or hunting under sunlight during late afternoons and even after dusk and early mornings, before sunrise. In my recent observation, I found that the black Drongos not only hunt during twilight hours but also under artificial bright light at Krishnagagar of Nadia District, West Bengal.

Between 8 and 12th November 2005, I went to Krishnanagar to be a part of the famous Jagatdhani Puja festival. During this Hindu festival all the streets are festooned with bright lights. On the night of 9th November at around 0230hours, as I was returning from one of the pooja pandals, I noticed several Black Drongos hunting and feeding on a variety of flying insects, which were drawn toward the bright lights. The artificial lights were being mobbed by the insects as well as the Drongos which were feasting on them. Later, I observed another group of Drongos hunting insects under artificial lights from the balcony of my room at High Street. The feeding activity continued up to 0900 hours. For the next three consecutive nights, I observed several groups of Drongos on almost all the brightly lit streets of Krishnangar, cooperatively hunting and feeding on insects. I observed the Drongos arriving between 0200 and 0300 hours and feasting on until 0900- 1000 hours or as long as the insects were available. But surprisingly on 12th November 2005, when the artificial lights were disconnected and removed, with the conclusion of the festival, the Drongos did not make an appearance as also the insects. Even though the regular street lamps were switched on, no such feeding frenzy was noticed.

Although Black Drongos prefer open, fallow paddy fields and grazing lands for feeding on a variety of insects, the sudden availability of good number of insects under bright lights was indeed tempting for the drongos. Also the limited availability insects in the surrounding fields and the sudden bounty in the city had driven the Drongos towards the bright lights of the city in anticipation. I feel, more observations are needed to understand the nocturnal feeding behaviour of black Drongos across the country.

BIRDWATCHING AT THATTAKAD K.J. HARTSHORN, Syderstone, King's Lynn, Norfolk PE31 8TR, England

Over the last three years my wife and I have enjoyed our bird-watching holidays in South India and this year we spent some time at the Thattakad sanctuary in Kerala.

We found the Palamattam Farm House to be ideally positioned for our excursions, and it is owned by a most charming Mr Motty Mathew (0485 2570411, or 080 5720517).

The bungalow is situated in a quiet tropical plantation, and at the end of a busy birdwatching day we found the area very peaceful.

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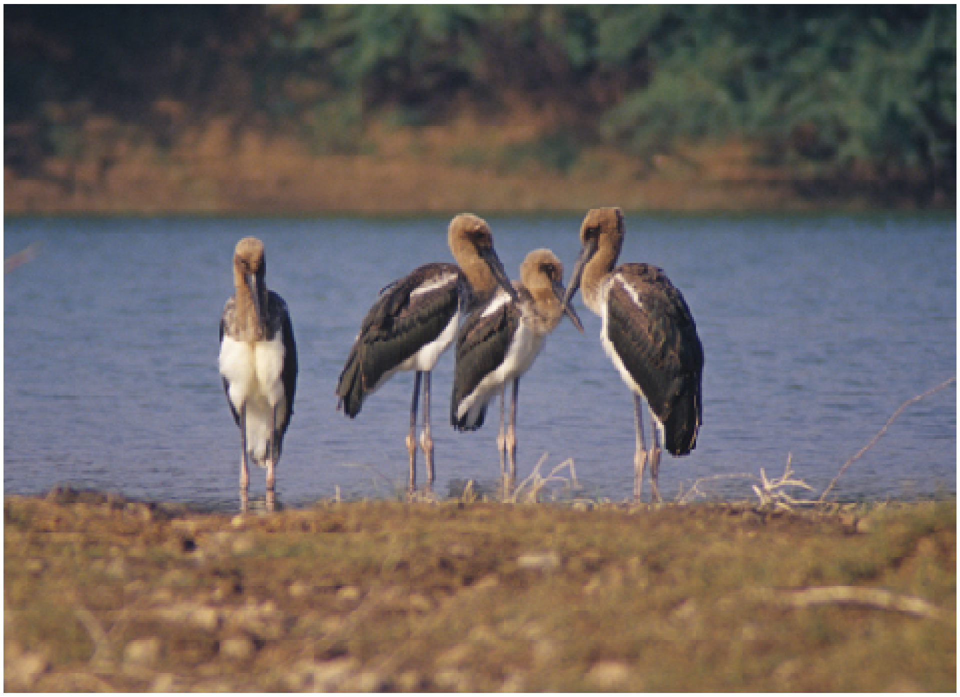
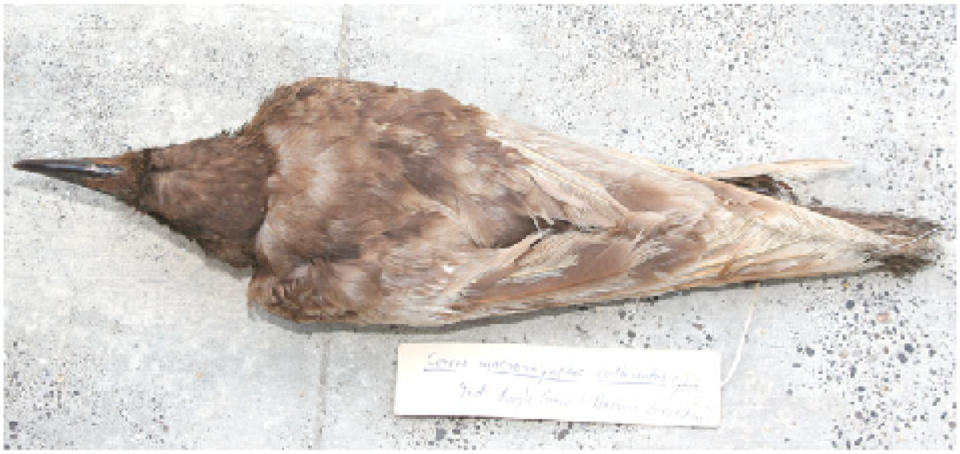


The four Black-necked stork (*Ephippiorhynchus asiaticus)* fledglings were found resting on a natural island of the river, next to a creak near the Marine National park, Jodiya Range, Jamnagar. *Photo. Kamal Bhatt.*



Photograph of the Isabelline Jungle Crow *(Corvus macrorhynchos)* collected by Anil Mahabal at Uralikanchan on Pune - Solapur road, district Pune, Maharashtra on March 7th 1979, bearing registration number B / 922

CURRENT BIOTICA

- a new journal in the offing

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Cover : **White-necked Stork** *(Ciconia episcopus)* is an uncommon, solemn-looking stork that forages in marshy grasslands, irrigated fields, deep forests with marshes and banks of streams. Stalks and preys on frogs, toads, small reptiles, crabs, and chubby insects. This stork has three behavioural idiosyncrasies: - it seldom nests in colonies; it seldom wades in water; it seldom calls or cries out. However, it breaks its silence during courtship by clattering its mandibles with neck bent over backwards and crown resting between the shoulders. It prefers to build a solitary nest in an inaccessible lofty tree, remains shy of humans and is generally wary of permitting a closer look. White-necked storks' population has suffered perceptibly in India, as per the Mid-winter waterfowl census reports. *Photo :* ***S. Shreyas****.*

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